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Ghettoizing Black Women's Literature : A Socio-Historic Study of Black Women Writers and the White Publishing Industry

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Ghettoizing Black Women's Literature:

A Socio-Historic Study of Black Women Writers and the White Publishing Industry

by

Kimberly Wiley Luna

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

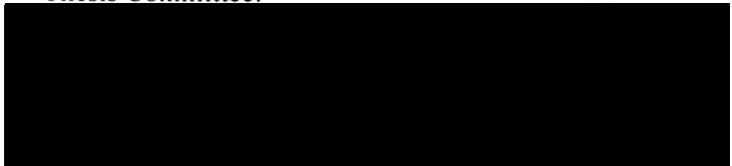
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

May 2015

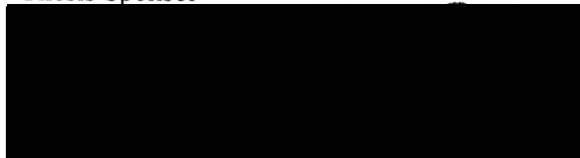
The College of Humanities and
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Department of English

Thesis Committee:



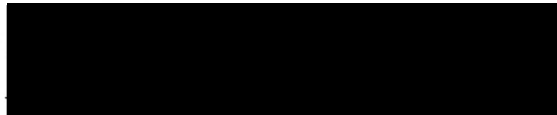
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ABSTRACT:

This paper contributes to the conversation of race/publishing by concentrating on black women's literature, exploring how it has been produced over the course of the last one hundred years and the impact of the white/black divide which has created a power structure where white publishers are able to assert control over black women's writing. The focus is on three commercially successful female African American writers— Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove. All three women were published by mainstream New York publishing houses made up of primarily white editors and publishers.

The research in this paper is informed by editorial theory and the work of John K. Young. Editorial theory emphasizes the importance of looking at the historical circumstances of textual production by examining the material documents and the texts in order to identify points of conflict. This includes an analysis of the various elements of a text, including book jacket, title, dedication page, earlier drafts, and advertisements. Many of these elements bear the markers of other parties including, but not limited to the editor, copy editor, publisher, marketers, salespeople, and reviewers. Because these individuals have historically been white, their choices and impact on the work of black women writers is seen as being particularly important.

This paper concludes that by reading author/publisher interactions against the backdrop of the cultural movements of the time we are able to witness shifting balances of power. While this does not mean we have come to a moment when the work of black women writers can be produced in a space that is not marked by her race or gender,

broader shifts in the culture have begun to change the rigid racial stratifications that surround the work allowing more and more black women writers to achieve both critical and commercial success with mainstream book publishers.

GHETTOIZING BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE
A SOCIO-HISTORIC STUDY OF BLACK WOMEN WRITERS AND THE WHITE
PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Masters of Arts

by

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"Under the skin . . . better to deal with them in business, etc., but otherwise keep them at a safe distance and under control. I tell you, Carl Van Vechten, think as you like, but they are just not like us." (Hurstun, *"What White Publishers Won't Publish."*)

In 1950, the African American writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston wrote an article for *Negro Digest* entitled, "What White Publishers Won't Publish." In her essay, Hurston pointed to the challenges African American writers encounter when looking to a publishing industry made up primarily of white publishers and editors. The issue, she wrote, was not unwillingness on the part of publishers to produce work by blackⁱ writers but rather the publishers' insistence that work produced by black writers must serve to represent their race to a white audience. Hurston's article was an appeal to editors and publishers to allow African American writers to speak for themselves rather than having white publishers speak for them.

A lack of diversity in a publishing industry comprised primarily of white publishers, editors, booksellers, and reviewers uncomfortable with talking about race, creates a power division that directly impacts the way in which work by black writers was and continues to be produced and consumed in the United States. Little has changed to diversify the publishing industry since Hurston wrote her article over sixty years ago. A 2014 *Publishers Weekly* "Publishing Industry Salary Survey" showed nearly ninety percent of publishing professionals self-identified as white (Milliot). This lack of diversity stands in contrast to contemporary readership. A recent Pew survey that looked

at reading trends in 2013 showed that African American women are the largest group of readers in the United States (Zickuhr).

In a program produced for National Public Radio, the poet Ken Chen, who is also the director of the Asian American Writers' Workshop, expressed concern that unless change happens in the industry, we will not see diversity in the books being published. He stated that, "Your ability to imagine that there is a market has to do with your ability to imagine that those people exist, and if [you] can't imagine that people of color actually exist and can buy books, then you can't imagine selling books to them. That's not just about a company corporate diversity policy; it's about actually knowing what's going on in communities of color" (qtd. in Reid).

Junot Diaz, the 2008 Pulitzer Prize winning author, also recently spoke out against the lack of diversity in both the publishing industry and MFA writing programs in a recent *All Things Considered* radio episode. These programs, including the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, are leading producers of literary talent for mainstream publishing houses. Diaz argued that these programs do little to encourage the work of writers of color, stating that "things have not kept up with the absolute transformation of our society, there's nothing about creative writing programs that I have seen that leads me to believe that, in general, the diversity found at the institutional level even begins to equal the diversity not only of our, just, country, but of our readerships" ("In Elite MFA Programs").

Rather than diversify, white publishers have historically chosen to approach the work of black writers in one of two ways. The first has been deciding not to publish their work. A 2012 independent study published by the online literary magazine *The*

Rumpus.net and reprinted in *The New York Times* showed that ninety percent of all books reviewed in 2011 by *The New York Times* were written by Caucasian writers (Gay “Where Things Stand”). While *The New York Times* is certainly not the only outlet for book reviews, it is representative of the larger publishing trends in the United States.

The second approach has been publishing black writers but placing restrictions on their work. By identifying their work as genre writing or more specifically labeling the works as “African American Literature,” publishers directly impact the sales of the work by promoting it to a smaller consumer base than it would otherwise have. They also foster the belief that writing by African Americans is only of interest to a black audience. By marketing a book to a particular segment of the population, booksellers impose limited distribution. In bookstores, we often find these works separated from the mainstream publications and relegated to a special section of the store. This approach has lately been referred to as the “ghettoizing” or the “racial profiling” of books by persons of color.

The critic Andrew Jarrett argues that the impact extends beyond sales and that the labeling of books as “African American Literature” serves as a means for determining “the way authors think about and write the literature, the way publishers classify and distribute it, the way bookstores receive and sell it, the way libraries catalog and shelve it, the way readers locate and retrieve it, the way teachers, scholars and anthologists use it, the way students learn from it—in short, the way we know it” (163). If we accept Jarrett’s argument, we can see that the implications go well beyond the profitability of a book. The way in which publishers market a book directly impacts our interpretation of that text as well.

In 2000, Ward Connerly, chairman of the American Civil Rights Institute, went even further to express his concerns over the segregation of texts by race. In an Op-Ed article in *The New York Times* entitled, “Where ‘Separate but Equal’ Still Rules,”

Connerly states:

The shelving of their books in a special section [called “African American Interest”] deprives black authors or “race” authors of significant sales opportunities, putting them at a competitive disadvantage compared with authors whose books are not ghettoized. But the economic harm pales in contrast to the intellectual and cultural damage caused by the bookstores’ version of racial profiling. They have fallen into the trap of thinking that a writer’s skin color is a reliable guide to judging the contents of his or her books. My book, like those by other writers who happen to be black, is meant for readers of any race interested in the subjects and controversies I address. By relying on a blatant stereotype—that blacks are the only ones interested in the history, culture, and politics of black people—the bookstores marginalize some writers and limit their ability to reach out to a broader audience and to share common bonds and values. (A.23)

Further apprehension has been expressed by the African American writer Bernice McFadden, who wrote an article that appeared in *The Washington Post* in 2010. In the article, she spoke of the same concerns of racial stereotyping in the marketing and selling of books by black women writers. Using herself as an example, she compared her novel *Sugar* to the bestselling novel *The Help*, written by Kathryn Stockett (a white female). She argued that while racial conflict functions as a primary theme in both books, the ways in which the publisher (Penguin for both titles) approached the packaging and

marketing was completely different in terms of racial identifiers. She cites the cover of Stockett's novel, a text about African American maids working in Mississippi in the 1960, which features the decidedly apolitical illustration of a bird. In contrast, the cover of her own novel, which also deals with racial conflict, shows the image of a young African American girl on the cover. She argues that the success of Stockett's novel can be seen as in part due to the publisher's decision to market the book, via the cover, to a universal audience, thus opening it up to a larger public than her book, which was marketed to a limited African American audience as genre fiction.

McFadden is, of course, not arguing that every novel written by an African American if marketed broadly is capable of the tremendous sales achieved by *The Help*. Rather, she is saying that publishers traditionally have privileged books written by white authors as being able to gain both black and white consumer acceptance. African American writers are relegated to the small category of books called "African American Literature." McFadden contends that publishers are significantly limiting the opportunities for black writers and other writers of color by depriving them of sales critical to the commercial success of a book.

This paper will contribute to the conversation of race/publishing by concentrating on women's literature, exploring how it has been produced over the course of the last one hundred years and the impact of the white/black divide which has created a power structure where white publishers are able to assert control over black women's writing. Black women writers are centered in this study as a doubly marginalized group. The focus will be on three commercially successful female African American writers—Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Rita Dove. All three women were published by

mainstream New York publishing houses made up of primarily white editors and publishers. By examining the socio-historical moments in which their work was produced, we can identify a progression toward greater independence, as black women writers continue to fight for greater control over their published work.

By juxtaposing a shift in power away from the publisher and toward the artist with the important social and cultural movements of the time, we are able to see the emergence of black women's voices in the dominant literary marketplace. The women writers discussed here were chosen because they were not just passive observers of the times in which they lived and wrote but were actively involved in the cultural movements, fighting for the empowerment of all black women. The experiences of these three women will follow key moments in African-American history beginning with the 1920s Harlem Renaissance and moving through the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, ending with the position of young black female writers in the 1990s and 2000s who have been directly impacted by the events of the Black Feminist Movement of the late 1970s and 1980s (including the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1979), at a time when a counter mainstream literary institution was beginning to emerge. This path demonstrates a shift in power from when black women writers were fully dependent on white publishers, patrons, and benefactors, to a period of dependence on black male writers, eventually leading to a period of greater (though not yet complete) independence through achieving the role of editor.

We begin with an examination of the short but important writing career of Nella Larsen. The daughter of a Danish mother and a father from the West Indies, Larsen was of mixed race. She, along with her husband, Elmer Imes, a prominent African American

physicist, moved to New York City in 1922 where she immediately immersed herself in the world of the New Negro intelligentsia. Larsen quickly became one of the most prominent writers of the Harlem Renaissance, despite having published just two novels and a handful of short stories. In spite of the sparseness of her work, she reached a level of success few black women were able to achieve, undoubtedly because she published with Knopf, a leading publisher during the 1920s and 1930s.

Larsen's friendship with the author and self-hailed "honorary Negro" Carl Van Vechten, ultimately proved critical to her securing a contract with Knopf. Having been chosen by Van Vechten, the published edition of Larsen's novel, *Passing*, bears markers of this relationship of dependence. We see such markers inscribed on the work both by the author and by her publisher as a means of marketing her work to a white audience. These "artifacts," or what the editorial scholar Jerome McGann terms the "bibliographic code," include the book jacket, title, dedication page, earlier drafts, and advertisements. The importance of McGann's work and editorial scholarship are further addressed later in this paper.

Despite the growth in black culture and arts in Harlem in the 1920s, the critic, Beverly M. Haviland, observed that "All of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance faced difficulties about how they would become authors in, and yet not in, the white world that controlled the traditions and the material means of publication. There were many issues to resolve: about the subject matter one chose, about the publisher one chose—or was chosen by" (qtd. in Young 39). Larsen's career evidences how for many black artists, and in particular black female artists, success was often regulated by wealthy white patrons, benefactors, and publishers who saw themselves as gatekeepers for their work.

Following Larsen, this study explores the publishing history of the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, whose career as a writer began when the black author Richard Wright recommended her poetry to his publisher, Harper & Brothers. Wright's vetting of Brooks opened up doors to the poet and established a relationship between the writer and publisher that lasted nearly twenty-years, during which time she became the first black female to win the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry.

Brooks's career, however, can be divided into two separate periods: the earlier collections published by Harper in the 1940s and 1950s and her later work, which was produced by smaller black presses. Brooks drew widespread attention when she became an active member of the Black Arts Movement. The Movement, which emerged in the 1960s, encouraged black artists to reject the "help" of the white community and to derive strength from black solidarity. For some black writers, this meant a shift away from mainstream white publishers and toward small black presses.

Brooks responded to this call when, in 1967, after attending a Fisk University conference, she made a move that would change the course of her literary career. Having decided to break from her longtime publisher, Harper & Row, she announced the decision, in an interview that later appeared in *The New York Times*, to publish all future projects only with black presses.

Despite the number of prominent African American writers involved in the Movement, Brooks stands out not only because she was so vocal in support of the Movement but because she was one of the few commercially successful black writers to break fully from a major white publisher. Her move solidified publicly her commitment to a Black Power politics, an action which Don L. Lee, an active member

and close friend and publisher to Brooks, commended by stating, "I know deep down inside that very few people in the Movement would be making that type of commitment" (Kent 232).

At a time in American history when African American artists throughout the country were gaining entry into the mainstream media, it is important to question why Brooks chose to swim against the current, reversing the usual career course from small press to mainstream publisher, and how that move impacted her work. Additionally, what did Brooks feel would be gained from this move, which would clearly limit the distribution and availability of her work and directly impact the financial earnings from her writing?

The division in Brooks's career allows us to understand how authorial identity is shaped by the decision to publish with mainstream presses versus small black literary presses. By exploring how a text is not solely formed by the artist but rather through the relationship among an author, editor, and publisher, we are able to see a set of values (including political) and assumptions placed on both the work and author. A comparison will be made between Brooks's two poetry collections that remain in print today, *Selected Poems* (Harper Perennial, 2006) and *Blacks* (David Company, 1987).

The third writer, Rita Dove, is a both critically and commercially successful poet who published her first collection of poetry in the early 1980s. Having attended college in the 1970s, Dove was part of a new generation of black women who came of age during the inception of the Black Feminist Movement. Unlike the generation of black women poets in the 1960s, Dove began her professional career at a time when black women were beginning to have their voices heard publically. As a result of the black feminists who

struggled before them, these women inhabited a world where their double identities as both women and African Americans could be reflected. As a result, the work created by Dove and others of her time was less focused on a primary need to strike out at a dominant male patriarchy and more attuned to exploring the nature of the black feminine world. Her early poetry collections display a desire to break away from the Black Arts Movement in order to embrace her identity as a multifaceted individual rather than defining herself solely by race, class, or gender.

The environment in which Dove published, as a leading poet, and her position as editor of *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* are both crucial to this work. An early review of the anthology by a leading white scholar, Helen Vendler, elicited a heated debate between the two women and a much discussed controversy over Dove's selections and, more specifically, her exclusions. Questioning the basis for this critique and how much it was motivated by Dove's race helps us to understand how Dove, as a black woman writer, is required, in the twentieth century to speak for her race, as were her literary foremothers. Additionally, exploring the textual markers that show how Penguin, the publisher of the anthology, markets Dove alongside the collection in racially marked ways allows us to explore the impact of the publisher on the work itself.

Because of the limited amount of scholarship available on my subject, much of the research is informed by the work of John K. Young. Young's work *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*, looks at both male and female African American writers published by mainstream publishing houses. He argues that because the publishing industry is predominantly white, it has perpetuated a white/black divide by producing what it labels

“black” literature marketed to a white audience. He argues that decisions made to edit, market, and sell black writers are often based on racial division and lead to, among other things, the restriction of aesthetic freedoms on the part of the black writer.

The editorial and marketing decisions of the publication process are not always available or often obvious. Therefore, Young relies on contemporary editorial theory as a means of acknowledging the particular historical circumstance that led to the production of a specific text. Young is influenced by the work of Jerome McGann, a leader in the field of editorial scholarship. McGann argues that “both linguistic and bibliographical texts are symbolic and signifying mechanisms. Each generates meaning, and while the bibliographical text commonly functions in a subordinate relation to the linguistic text, ‘meaning’ in literary works results from the exchanges these two great semiotic mechanisms work with each other” (qtd. in Young 23). We can, therefore, derive meaning not only from what is typically seen as the “inside” of a book, the text, but also from ways the inside relates to the “outside,” the cover and book jacket. Young’s work emphasizes the importance of looking at the historical circumstances of textual production by examining the material documents and the texts in order to identify points of conflict. Furthermore, editorial theory exposes the larger cultural systems through which minority texts are produced. Because the production of a book is not limited to the author, Young and other editorial theorists recognize the impact of other parties on a work, including but not limited to the editor, copy editor, publisher, marketers, salespeople, and reviewers. Because these individuals have historically been white, Young sees their choices and impact on the work of black writers as particularly important.

While Young's work does not focus primarily on the interaction of race and gender, this paper argues that by paying special attention to both we can better understand the specific challenges black women have faced. As a historically marginalized group, they have been doubly challenged by both their race and their gender. Black women's writing presents a challenge to readers and, by extension, those who attempt to produce it for publication. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson addresses the problematic nature of black women's voices in her article "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Women Writer's Literary Tradition." Drawing from both the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who identifies language as an expression of social identity, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's "dialectical model of conversation," Henderson contends that black women writers take part in complex discourses that are both "familial, or testimonial and public, or competitive discourses—discourses that both affirm and challenge the values and expectation of the reader" (20). She asserts that the black female must employ multiple voices in order to represent her diverse subjectivity. According to Henderson, "black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women" (20). By acknowledging this dynamic, we can begin to understand the difficulty white publishers have with publishing the work of a writer that in Henderson's terms "speaks as much to the notion of commonality and universalism as it does to the sense of difference and diversity" (36). In an attempt to appeal to all groups, white publishers often simplify or mask these many voices in order to prevent the work from being perceived as adversarial.

Finally, this study is informed by the work of historical scholars who have published on the periods in which Larsen, Brooks and Dove produced—the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and our contemporary allegedly post-racial society. Biographies are heavily drawn on, including Thadious Davis’s extensive work on Nella Larsen, George E. Kent’s work on Gwendolyn Brooks, and Pat Righelato’s study of Rita Dove, as well as published interviews as a means to understanding the individual writers’ beliefs, ideas and feelings during the times in which they write.

There is still a need for greater diversity in the publishing industry. Perhaps historical progress thus far has not eliminated the problematic nature of producing minority texts for a diverse audience. However, research offered here ultimately suggests that social changes have somewhat altered the power structure of the black writer/white publisher relationship in order to empower black women writers to more fully express their unique voices.

The Politics of Compromise: Nella Larsen and the Harlem Renaissance

“Editors not only welcome us, they seem eager to give us an opportunity to show ourselves . . . [I]t may be a fad on their part, but I think it’s an awfully good fad” (Larsen qtd. in Kaplan x).

The 1920s marked a period during which an explosion in the arts gave birth to a socio-cultural phenomenon called the “New Negro.” Harlem served as a backdrop to this movement. From Harlem, numerous young African American artists introduced the

world to their art. While African Americans as a cultural group in the United States had always created new forms of music, literature, and art, this period was the first time that black artists experienced a high demand not only from within their own community but also from mainstream white America. Widespread interest by magazine and book publishers created a new space for black writers who had previously struggled to have their work read. Commercial publishers discovered an African American literary culture that for them, because of its originality and difference, became highly sought after and in vogue.

The blossoming of African-American aesthetic culture in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance occurred at the same time that the book publishing industry was undergoing significant changes. In the late 1910s, a split began between the older, established publishing houses that were based in Boston and the newer houses emerging in New York City. The new publishers were primarily young Jewish men who, in response to the influx of immigrants to the city, sought to establish themselves exclusively as the publishers of new African American voices for an American public. Included among the new, more marginal publishing houses were Alfred A. Knopf, Boni & Liveright, Harcourt, Brace, and the Viking Press (founded by Harold K. Guinzburg and George S. Oppenheim). The Jewish publishers were looked upon as outsiders in a tightly guarded industry which had been previously composed of Anglo-Americans from Boston. The scholar Gilmer Walker believes that it is this position that allowed them a new vision, which "lacked any allegiance to the entrenched Anglo-American literary heritage, that foundation of respectable conservatism which had proved so profitable to their older rivals" (qtd. in Hutchinson 345). As a result, it is not surprising

that men like Knopf were the ones to become the leading publishers of African American literature during the Harlem Renaissance. They actively sought out the work of various ethnic and racial groups and were instrumental in the development of the Modernist Movement.

Although publishers like Knopf showed a deep commitment to their writers, many critics have argued that they exploited African American writers in the 1920s. Some claimed that the Jewish publishers, who evidenced a newfound fascination with African themes and stories, were actually capitalizing on the “vogueness” of Harlem. They have been criticized for exploiting the “exotic primitivism” in the work of the Negro writer and marketing the writing of black authors under the single, limiting category of the black experience. W.E.B. DuBois argued that white publishers, in “catering to white folk,” wanted only to publish works that portrayed “Uncle Toms, Topsy, good ‘darkies’ and clowns” (qtd. in Kaplan 317). He said that Negro artists were allowing their work to become a propagandistic tool in the hands of publishers, which must be taken back and claimed as their own. In accordance with DuBois’ idea, many black artists rejected working with white publishers. They sought to establish standards that would protect young black writers from the potential motives of white publishers who they believed only wanted to exploit their “blackness.” The author and *Opportunity* editor, Charles S. Johnson, put forth a set of rules that could be applied to the new writers’ work. He believed that Negro writing must:

Encourage the reading of literature both by Negro authors and about Negro life, not merely because they are Negro authors but because what they write is literature and because the literature is interesting; to foster a market for Negro

writers and for literature by and about Negroes; to bring these writers into contract with the general world of letters to which they have been for the most part timid and inarticulate strangers; to simulate and foster a type of writing by Negroes which shakes itself free of deliberate propaganda and protest. (qtd. in Lewis 97)

Certainly, some publishers at the time were guilty of exploiting black writers. However, many scholars believe that the new Harlem Renaissance publishers were a different group. George Hutchinson's book *Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* argues that these publishers were financially taking great risks in deciding to publish the work of black authors in the early 1920s. Most works proved unprofitable, and the publishing house took significant losses. In most cases, the financial failings were felt solely by the publishers who paid out advances against earnings that would never be recouped.

Despite the risks, publishers like Alfred A. Knopf, who would become the most powerful publisher of African American literature, committed deeply to making long-term financial investments in the work of black writers throughout the Harlem Renaissance.

Many publishers developed close, intimate relationships with their authors under contract and were extremely selective about whom they signed. This new group of publishers, committed to developing new voices for a new time, understood that while the short-term success of a writer can often be connected to trends and fads, long-term success must be viewed in relation to the commitment and dedication of the author-publisher relationship.

As a show of commitment, publishers invested heavily in writers. Boni & Liveright was one of the first publishers to introduce large-scale publicity campaigns with the goal of introducing a large audience to the work of their black authors. One such event took place on March 21, 1924. Charles S. Johnson organized a gala to celebrate the release of Jessie Redmon Fauset's book, *There Is Confusion* (published by Boni & Liveright). Fauset was a prominent black female writer during the Harlem Renaissance as well as the literary editor for the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*. Through her work with the magazine, she was credited with enabling the careers of many of the black voices during the period including Jean Toomer and Countee Cullen. Because of Fauset's connections, Johnson saw the event as an opportunity to bring together the new younger generation of black writers and the white publishers.

Over a hundred guests were invited, and the guest list included a who's who of young black writers, including Jean Toomer, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Nella Larsen. Older generation writers included W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and a number of major white literary figures such as Carl Van Doren, editor of the *Century*, Frederick Allen of *Harper's*, Walter Bartlett of Scribner's, and Horace Liveright of Boni & Liveright. The evening was all about promoting the new generation of Negro writers, and the gala proved successful, eventually leading to several book contracts.

Events like Fauset's book party were important to white publishers because, despite their interest in publishing black writers of the time, most struggled to gain access to the insular black community of Harlem. White publishers relied heavily on individuals like Carl Van Vechten, who was instrumental in forging relationships between black

artist and publishers. Alfred A. Knopf published Van Vechten, and he became close friends with both the publisher and his wife. More than a friend, Van Vechten became what Carla Kaplan identifies as one of the “white intermediaries” on whom white publishers relied heavily in order to tell them which black writers to pursue. According to Kaplan in her book *Miss Ann in Harlem*, “Alfred and Blanche Knopf, never took a step in a black direction without first consulting Carl Van Vechten . . .” (195). Van Vechten was a bestselling author who wrote prolifically on Negro art, publishing in one single year ten articles and five book reviews of African American art, music, theatre, and literature (Coleman 83).

Van Vechten was a passionate supporter of those writers he chose to promote and, in March of 1925, he set his sights firmly on developing the career of Nella Larsen. Larsen, still an unknown writer at the time, was working as a librarian at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in the heart of Harlem. Having previously worked as a nurse, she aspired to become an author and saw the moment as ripe for establishing herself as a new black novelist. Upon meeting Larsen at the gala, Van Vechten immediately latched on to her, recognizing and encouraging her literary talent. More than just encouraging her writing, he was instrumental in securing her book contract with his friends the Knopfs. Van Vechten, after reading Larsen’s draft of what would later become the novel *Passing*, went directly to the publisher where, as he wrote in his diary, “I stir Blanche and Alfred up about Nella Larsen’s *Passing* making quite a scene” (qtd. in Hutchinson 55).

Larsen saw Knopf as a publishing house committed to a higher quality of books, and was pleased to sign on with the publisher. Acutely aware of the fads associated with

writing by black writers at the time, Larsen aspired to achieve success independent of her race. Nevertheless, John K. Young points out that Larsen, a person of mixed race, was uniquely aware of the way in which her authorial identity could be commodified. When Knopf decided to brand her first book as part of their “Negro in Unusual Fiction” series, a decision that implicitly chose to situate both the work and the author in racial terms, she did not oppose the idea. While Larsen was very open about her mixed race (her jacket biography identified her as bi-racial) she recognized the greater marketability and thus profitability of leveraging her African American identity. In a letter written to her friend and fellow writer Dorothy Peterson, dated 21 July 1927, Larsen encouraged her to take advantage of publishers’ interest in work by black writers, saying, “Dorothy, you’d better write some poetry, or something. I’ve met a man from Macmillan’s who asked me to look out for any negro stuff and send them to him” (165).

Van Vechten’s involvement in Larsen’s publishing career extends well beyond his initial recommendation of her to the Knopfs. Actively involved in the promotion of *Passing*, he was invited to attend a marketing meeting at the publisher’s office, a meeting with the author, publisher, an editor, and two salesmen, in order to brainstorm ways to promote Larsen’s work. Out of this meeting arose the idea of wrapping the book in a green bellyband that would carry a blurb from Van Vechten himself. The blurb read: “A strangely provocative story, superbly told. The sensational implication of *PASSING* should make this book one of the most widely discussed on the Spring list” (qtd. in Kaplan xii). This literal wrapping of Larsen’s work in Van Vechten’s name speaks to how intertwined Larsen and Van Vechten were in the production of the book. The publisher’s need to attach a prominent bestselling white name to a book whose subject

matter was clearly about race acknowledges the inability of a white audience to accept a black female writer on her own. While Larsen's friendship with Van Vechten clearly opened a door that was shut to most black women writers of the time, that friendship also served to bolster her public identity in order to make her "safer" to the white consumers who were Van Vechten's primary consumers.

Rather than fight against Van Vechten's influence, Larsen elected to share a sense of ownership over the work with him. In August of 1928, upon completing the novel, she wrote to him, "I have this day completed your novel 'Nig.' That is it only needs to be copied. Thank God, Glory Hallelujah Amen!" (qtd. in Bernard 200). *Nig*, the initially proposed title for *Passing*, is a reference to the character John Bellew's calling his wife, Clare, "Nig," not knowing that she is an African American passing for white. Yet, despite its connection to the text, the choice of the title *Nig* can also be read as a direct nod to Van Vechten's controversial novel, *Nigger Heaven*, a connection that would have been made by the reading public of the time. By selecting the title, Larsen was overtly attempting to position herself as a writer in support of Van Vechten. Knopf, however, having barely survived the fallout from Van Vechten's novel, was not eager to reignite the spark which had generated a flood of publicity, and the publisher persuaded her to re-title the book on the grounds that the title *Nig* would be too inflammatory for a novel by an unproven writer. Knopf was, however, open to the title *Passing*, with its connection to miscegenation, which would elicit interest without giving offense (Davis 306-7).

Larsen's admiration for Van Vechten can also be read in the book dedication. Very simply, the dedication states: "for Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff" (Larsen 3). Larsen's choice of words, like her intended title, suggests a way to associate herself

more deeply with Van Vechten. Kaplan, in her introduction to *Passing*, states that “to any reader familiar with the *Nigger Heaven* controversy, Larsen’s dedication signals an identification with the “dangerous . . . abhorrent . . . compelling . . . arresting . . . mysterious . . . not safe” (xiii). The dedication also echoes Langston Hughes’s dedication to Van Vechten in his collection of poetry *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, which was published in 1927 at the height of the controversy over Van Vechten’s novel. Hughes’s two-line dedication, which read, “The author dedicates the volume to Carl Van Vechten. ’Nuff sed,’” was received as it was intended by the poet, as an open and clear statement of support for Van Vechten and his work (Bernard 157).

The scholar George Hutchinson additionally notes that in the first edition printing of Larsen’s *Passing*, the dedication is more prominently set than in later editions (56). In this edition, the words are spread out over four lines and centered in a type size that is larger than both the body of the book and the section heads. He argues that displaying the dedication so prominently on the page not only serves to highlight the friendship between the author and her mentor but can also be read as emphasizing the power relationship which demands that the black artist give just praise to her patron.

The relationship that existed between Nella Larsen and Carl Van Vechten left an indelible mark on the novel *Passing*. Van Vechten’s relationship with Larsen allowed her to do what few black women at the time were able to do, publish a commercially successful novel with a mainstream publisher. It is difficult to say what Larsen’s career would have looked like without Van Vechten’s presence. While many have argued that Van Vechten exploited Larsen by asserting control over her writing and by inserting

himself into the process, thus limiting Larsen's authorial agency, others believe that Larsen was complicit in what she viewed as a partnership between the two.

The fact remains that as a female writer of color, Larsen, like most women writers before her struggled to be taken seriously. Women like the poet Gwendolyn Bennett, who, despite being a prominent member of the Harlem community and a writer for the black literary magazine *Opportunity* has historically been overlooked as a contributor to the period. This is in part due to her inability to secure a publishing contract with a mainstream publisher during the time.

The writer, poet, and playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson also faced the many challenges of publishing as a black female. Writing extensively on issues of race and gender, Johnson published a number of poems and short stories in *Opportunity* and in *The Crisis*, the magazine of the NAACP, yet was never published by a large New York publishing house. Contemporary literary scholars have recently discovered that Johnson penned a number of short stories under the male name, Paul Tremaine, as a means of having her work read (Hull). For many black women writers, only recently has scholarly work rediscovered their writing and recognized them as important contributors to the African American literary tradition and culture.

Larsen's European roots may have afforded her entrance into white circles where other black women writers were not permitted, yet during the 1920s, it was her identity as a Negro which Van Vechten and the Knopfs knew could be marketed. In trying to establish herself in the New York literary scene, Larsen understood that she needed to exploit her biraciality, and she recognized that she would not be able to do so alone.

Larsen identified her friendship with Van Vechten as her opportunity to break into the world of mainstream publishing.

Drawing on an awareness of the marketability of a black writer during the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen aligned her work with Van Vechten in a calculated attempt to market her work to the same white audience that Van Vechten had reached with his bestselling novel, *Nigger Heaven*. Referring to her friend as “a trusting soul”, Larsen capitalized on her friendship with Van Vechten in order to navigate the world of publishing (Davis 186). The result was multiple book contracts with one of the most successful publishers of the time. Larsen was acutely aware of the pitfalls of being a writer of the moment, and she recognized that the success of many Negro writers during the 1920s was rooted in a negotiation of the interracial power dynamics of the time.

The literary scholar Cheryl Wall finds that Larsen saw hard work as the only answer to the exploitation of the marketplace. In an unpublished interview with Harlem journalist Marion Stakey, Larsen remarked of the publishing fad, “even if the fad for our writing passes presently, as it is bound to do I suppose, we will in the meantime have laid the foundation for our permanent contributions to America culture” (qtd. in Wall 95). Wall describes the extremely high standards to which Larsen held her work, often including extensive revisions. As a writer, she believed that her work appealed to a nobler cause. The subject of her novels were brave and unabashed, dealing directly with both racial and gender issues in a way that few other writers were doing at the time.

Rather than being rendered powerless over her work, Larsen forged relationships with white editors, publishers, and patrons who helped her to secure a path to success that otherwise might have been impossible to obtain. Larsen’s career reflects how publishing

in the 1920s resulted in a series of compromises for many black women writers whose forced alliances with white benefactors allowed them to reach a larger audience and broader market for their voices.

Publishing Black: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Black Arts Movements

"My aim in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully 'call' all Black people: Black people in taverns, Black people in alleys, Black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to teach Black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones; not always to 'teach'—I shall entertain, to illumine. My newish voice will not be an imitation of the contemporary young Black voice, which I do so admire, but an extending adaptation of today's G.B. voice." (Brooks qtd. in Kent 211)

Born on June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas, Gwendolyn Brooks moved when young to Chicago, where she and her family lived on the South Side in the largest black community in the city. She began writing poetry at an early age and was encouraged by her family. In the 1930s, she became recognized as a poet within the Chicago literary scene. Her craft allowed her access to literary workshops where she was able to grow alongside other prominent local artists, including the poets Margaret Walker and Margaret Danner. Through these connections, Brooks was introduced to members of the South Side Writers Group, a group of black writers and poets.

Her public career, however, would not begin until it was announced in 1943 that she had won the prize at the Midwest Writers Conference. She was immediately approached by an editor at Knopf who expressed interest in her writing. She encouraged her to submit a group of poems to the publisher. Brooks submitted forty poems, all of which were rejected. However, she was urged to expand on her "Negro" poems in order to compile a full-length book. Despite not resulting in a contract, the attention she garnered from a major New York publishing house was seen as a tremendous success so early in her career. She continued to submit her work and was eventually accepted by Harper & Brothers (later known as Harper & Row).

At the time, Harper was one of the largest trade publishers in the United States. Included most prominently in their list of authors was Richard Wright, the African American author. The success of Wright's novel prompted the publisher to look to acquire more work by African Americans. While Harper ultimately signed up Brooks, it was still rare for black female writers to be given book contracts, and her acceptance came only after she was vetted by Wright himself.

A leader of the 1930s Naturalist Movement, Wright had released *Native Son* three years earlier. The book was a tremendous commercial success for both the author and publisher, selling a quarter million copies, making the national bestsellers list, and becoming a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club (the first by an African American writer). Within the Harper house, Wright had firmly established himself as the most commercially successful African American author of the time. He used this position to wield a significant amount of influence over the work of other African Americans accepted for publication. While his support had primarily been directed toward black

male writers, including James Baldwin and Chester Himes, Wright was immediately struck by Brooks's poetry and sought to foster her career as a poet. After having received Brooks's submissions from his editor, Wright encouraged Harper to sign her. He noted of her poetry that:

There is no self-pity here, not a striving for effects. She takes hold of reality as it is and renders it faithfully. There is not so much an exhibiting of Negro life to white in these poems, as there is an honest human reaction to the pain that lurks so colorfully in the Black Belt . . . But she is a real poet, she knows what to say and how to say it. I'd say that she ought to be helped at all costs. America needs a voice like hers and anything that can be done to help her to bring out a good volume should be done. (qtd. in Kent 62)

Harper valued Wright's opinion, but the publisher also saw this statement of support as an opportunity to position her work alongside him and the Naturalist Movement. In the 1930s and 1940s, Naturalism was seen as an important means for determining literary value, and Lawrence Hogue, in his book *Discourse and the Other*, describes how "Naturalism's literary themes and motifs—determinism, survival, violence, and taboo—became the standards by which the worth of a literary text was assessed and judged" (29). Within the context of race, the Naturalist School, led by Richard Wright, most specifically responded to the vision in the 1920s of African Americans as being exotic. Naturalists showed the harshness of urban life, depicting man as a victim and his environment as the victimizer. While Brooks resisted defining herself as a Naturalist, she described her poetry as "a record of my observations and, in some

part, of my experiences,” and much of her work, including the poems which made up her first collection, focused on the life of the urban black poor (qtd. in Gayles 3).

Harper published Gwendolyn Brooks’s first book, *A Street in Bronzeville*, in August 1945. It was composed of three sections, “A Street in Bronzeville,” “The Sundays of Satin Legs Smith,” and “Gay Chaps at the Bar.” The first section included twenty vignettes through which Brooks exposed life within Bronzeville, a black ghetto on Chicago’s South Side. The subject matter was personal for Brooks, who herself had once been a resident of the Bronzeville section and understood the struggles of everyday life. The poems reflected many of the Naturalist ideals that Wright had earlier praised in her work: observations on the conditions of daily life, the effects of World War II, and the impact of place and social conditions on the individual—each central to the work.

The poem “kitchenette building,” was lauded for Brooks’s ability to express the “universal,” rather than to focus solely on race. This poem, which describes life within the space of a cramped, small housing unit, makes no specific reference to either race or gender. The individual, who becomes a “we,” is helpless against the realities of life, like “rent,” feeding a wife,” and “satisfying a man” (rpt. in *Blacks* 20). Brooks’s use of the pronoun “we” marks the tenants of the building as not alone in their struggle; rather, she speaks about the struggle of daily life for all persons living in poverty. It was this humanistic universalism that critics would praise and that her editor would encourage in her future work. It also stands as a point of direct contrast to her later work, as will be discussed later.

Brooks in her poetry was also specifically concerned with women. As a poor black woman, Brooks was aware of the struggles women experienced. Included in *A*

Street in Bronzeville is the poem "The Mother," which is today one of her best-known and most widely anthologized. Interestingly, this poem is the only one of the entire collection that Richard Wright specifically asked to be omitted. The poem, which mourns the death of children who have been aborted because of poverty, is both emotional and complicated in its depiction of motherhood. Neither pro-choice nor pro-life, the reflections of the mother speak bluntly to the realities of life in poverty. Written nearly thirty years before the landmark *Roe vs. Wade* decision, the poem is an example of the special way in which Brooks was able, in her early poetry, to make the personal political.

Abortions will not let you forget.

You remember the children you got that you did not get,

The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,

The singers and workers that never handled the air.

You will never neglect or beat

Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.

You will never wind up the sucking-thumb

Or scuttle off ghosts that come.

You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,

Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye. (rpt. in *Blacks* 21)

Wright opposed the poem because he felt strongly that the world was not ready to receive a poem about abortions. He felt that the subject matter would be overwhelming to a reader. Brooks, however, pushed back, arguing for the poem to remain. Harper ultimately made the decision to keep the poem, a decision which Brooks celebrated.

A Street in Bronzeville received both critical and commercial success. Initial sales of the book were more than 2,500 copies, and only a month after publication, it went back for its second printing (Kent 66). Publishing with a large mainstream press had given Brooks the ability to reach a larger consumer base. Where previously her work had been known only within her primarily black Chicago community, the Harper name and the positioning alongside Wright allowed her to successfully appeal to both white and black readers. Brooks's biographer George Kent noted that "white readers were impressed by the breadth of its humanistic concerns, while black readers were impressed by its refusal to be 'obsessed' with race" (66). Many critics went so far as to strip race entirely from the work, believing that race would only limit the success of black writers.

Paul Engle wrote what would be Brooks's first major review and one that she felt greatly influenced her early career. The review was titled "Chicago Can Take Pride in New, Young Voice in Poetry," and it appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*. Engle, addressing a Chicagoan audience, emphasized the poet's relationship with the city and praised her as a Chicago poet. His review also vehemently addressed the importance of reading her poetry outside of the confines of race. In praise of "Gay Chaps at the Bar," Engle wrote, "And finest of all, they can be read for what they are and not, as the publishers want us to believe, as Negro poems. For they should no more be called Negro poems than the poems of Robert Frost should be called white poetry . . . The finest praise that can be given the book is that it would be a superb volume of poetry in any year by any person of any color" (qtd. in Sullivan 558).

The review was a solid affirmation of Brooks's poetry, and the poet regarded it as establishing her early reputation. Engle's attempt to erase race from the work and,

indirectly, from the poet reflects the popular thinking of the 1940s and 1950s. Other African American artists, like Margaret Walker, who wrote during the time, also sought to write beyond the confines of racial identity. Walker's poetry focused on the vulnerability of disadvantaged peoples and attempted to challenge a socio-economic hierarchy by advocating for a more equal system for *all* marginalized people indiscriminate of race. Walker, like Brooks believed that by focusing on the "ordinary" in their poetry she could speak to the masses.

The way in which the publisher marketed the book, however, did not reflect this erasure of race. The material traces of the book show signs that Harper promoted the work as a collection by a black poet in order to appeal to both blacks and whites. The front cover of the book carries a quote by Richard Wright and a tagline clearly situating the subject matter of the book as black city life: "Ballads, blues, and portraits in verse recollecting Negro life in a great American city" (*A Street In Bronzeville*). Furthermore, the back cover prominently features a photo of the author and lists blurbs by Carl Van Vechten.

Perhaps in response to Engle's review, the publisher encouraged Brooks to develop an even greater universality in her writing. Her longtime editor, Elizabeth Lawrence, urged her in her next book to appeal to a broader base. Correspondence between the author and editor shows how Brooks's work was directly influenced by her editor's suggestions. In an exchange in which Brooks makes a case for the inclusion of a specific poem, she remarks to Lawrence, "I remember thinking, as I finished, that it especially would please you. It seemed, to me, to have an element of that universality which you hoped, long ago, I'd get on more familiar terms with" (Kent 100). It was not

unusual for the young and somewhat naive Brooks to seek her editor's approval. Lawrence was her first editor and her guide through the pitfalls of the publishing industry. The two had a strong working relationship which lasted for twenty years, beginning with *A Street in Bronzeville* and ending only seven books later when Lawrence retired from the industry.

On a personal level, Brooks regarded Lawrence as a friend, and Kent, in his biography, identifies Lawrence's relationship to Brooks as having been maternal. As the elder of the two women, Kent describes Lawrence as possessing "a worldly sophistication about the practicalities of life and the vast business world... Elizabeth could confidently give firm suggestions as the person initiating the always-struggling author into the ins and outs of bookmaking and the publishing world" (177). Brooks relied on Lawrence and often sought her editor's support and approval. After being awarded the Pulitzer Prize, she telegraphed Lawrence to thank her for sending flowers, writing, "The card makes me want to cry. I have been wanting for years to make you proud. Because always you have gone out of your way to help me and to please me" (qtd. in Kent 88). Their relationship, as this exchange shows, was not outside the established cultural power structure. Lawrence represented the white publishing industry, which controlled the commercial production of works by African Americans. A young black woman writer like Brooks often felt the need to make herself amenable to her editor's wishes.

Lawrence often expressed a need to deemphasize Brooks's blackness in order to universalize her work and appeal to a larger audience. Suggesting the removal of certain poems that she felt would not be well received by a white audience, the editor worked

closely with Brooks on all of her books. Writing a letter of support for Brooks's application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, she commended Brooks for her ability to transcend her race. She praised the poet's talents, particularly recognizing "the inevitable limitation affecting her talents derived from her being a Negro and writing of a special world." In his biography, Kent states that Lawrence revealed, "She had found few artists who were able to overcome personal limitations of one kind or another" and that Brooks "succeeds rather better than most in celebrating the human condition above the Negro or special condition" (Kent 173). Lawrence, in her role as editor, would clearly play a large part in Brooks's evolution from a poor black Bronzeville poet to an internationally renowned poet. While Brooks did not object to Lawrence shaping her identity for a mainstream marketplace, it would later become clear to Brooks that she and Lawrence inhabited two different worlds and that she would need to choose which world she wanted to belong to.

The relationship ended in 1964 when Elizabeth Lawrence retired from publishing. Harper assigned Brooks two other editors, Genevieve Young and Ann Harris, to work with her, although these relationships would never be as strong as Brooks's relationship with Lawrence. A point of conflict between Brooks and the white female editors may have been that at this time she was becoming active in the Black Arts Movement. As a result, she was becoming much more attuned to the imbalance in the power relationship between a black author and a white publisher. Kent notes that Lawrence's departure, while upsetting to Brooks, also forced her to recognize the inherent differences between the two women. She began to awaken to the fact that, "Despite the integrationist script from which both read their lines, the two represented black and white worlds, and the

structure of their relationship would later arouse in Gwendolyn ambivalence. Thankful for having been prevented from disastrous plunges, she would still wonder whether this young chicken–mother hen relationship had not persisted too long” (177).

The change in Brooks’s relationship with her longtime publisher reflects her growing involvement in political events taking place in the 1960s. It was during this time that the Black Nationalist Movement flourished. Brooks quickly became deeply involved with the Movement, aligning herself with a new generation of black writers and poets. The Black Nationalist Movement was launched out of the frustrations of the Civil Rights Movement. Students who had followed the non-violent protests of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were unsatisfied with the minimal change achieved through non-violence. In 1966, Stokely Carmichael, the head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), spoke to what many students felt and thought. In a speech in Mississippi Carmichael said, “The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin us is to take over. We’ve been saying freedom for six year and we ain’t got nothin’. What we gonna start saying now is Black power” (qtd. in Washington 280).

Carmichael’s call to arms showed the anger felt by black Americans toward white supremacy and the need for a black separatist ideology. The poet Leroi Jones, who later assumed the name Amiri Baraka, became the leader of the Black Nationalist Movement. Baraka believed that the black writer must reject mainstream white literary institutions and focus on the production of works that would create a new black aesthetic. The Nationalist literary school rejected the need for public white critical validation and saw itself as a means for uniting the black community.

Gwendolyn Brooks's initiation into the Black Nationalist Movement began when she attended the second Fisk Writers Conference in 1967. Deeply affected by what she heard and saw, she embraced the changes taking place in the world around her. No longer was the black artists' goal to transcend race through universalism but rather to embrace African culture and heritage and a new understanding of African Americans' relationship to it. The historian John Henry Clarke in his speech during the conference argued that, "It is singularly the mission of the black writer to tell his people what they have been, in order for them to understand what they are. And from this the people will clearly understand what they still must be" (Kent 197).

What Brooks heard at the conference resonated, and she responded by publicly breaking from her longtime publisher, Harper & Row, taking her career in a new direction. The announcement that she would leave Harper was not addressed directly to the publisher. Rather, her editor and publisher learned of the decision from a statement Brooks made at a Yale University conference that was later published in *The New York Times*. The article reported that at the conference "Miss Brooks also announced that a black publishing firm, Broadside Press, would print her writing from now on" (Kent 232).

Prior to the announcement, Brooks's relationship with Harper had become distant. By publically announcing her desire to leave Harper, her publisher for over twenty-years, for Broadside she was making a statement that, as a black artist, she was fully committed to the Black Nationalist Movement. Brooks later argued that her relationship with Harper was never adversarial and that her move was not an attack on her publisher. In *Report from Part One*, she states, "I have left Harper not because of any difficulty therewith, but

simply because my first duty is to the estimable, developing black publishing companies” (77). Young argues that continuing to publish with Harper restricted Brooks’s aesthetic freedom and, in order to create the kind of work that would speak freely to a contemporary black readership, she needed to sacrifice an appeal to a mainstream market (100). Brooks saw white publishers as unable to reach a black audience, a group to which she belonged and to whom she wished to speak directly.

Harper responded to Brooks’s announcement by deciding to publish an omnibus edition of her works, *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* (1971). The move was strategic on the part of the publisher who knew that once Brooks’s earlier collections went out of print, the rights would revert back to the author, thus leaving Harper without the right to publish her work in the future. By publishing a collection of her poetry, Harper would retain the rights to her works. Brooks learned that while she may have severed the relationship with her publisher, Harper was not willing to entirely give up power over her work.

Nevertheless, Brooks moved onward, initiating the next chapter of her career. In a 1967 interview with Paul Angle, she responded to the question, “And you still write because you want to?” by stating that:

Yes, I still write because I want to, but there is a difference now. Recently, I confided to friends how much more fun writing was in those years of my youth, when I had no publishing prospects. I was free. If things were not “right,” what difference did it make? But now, when I have pretty good prospects of having what I write published, I’m very concerned. I want to be sure that everything is good, and this imposes constraint. (qtd. in Gayles 14)

With a greater awareness of racial politics, Brooks developed a deep commitment to the Black Nationalist Movement and became involved with black writers' conferences, conducting writing workshops for a younger generation of black students who would be instrumental in the development of a new black consciousness. She asserted the belief that "Black Afrikaans should be concerned about blackness . . ." She believed that "Black poetry is written by Blacks, about Blacks, to Blacks" (qtd. in Gayles 74).

For her next book, Brooks aligned herself with the Broadside Press of Detroit, which published *Riot* in 1969. She had always positioned herself as a Chicagoan, and the break from her New York publisher allowed her the opportunity to further distance herself geographically from the mainstream world of white publishers. Broadside was an African American literary press founded by Dudley Randall. Brooks was drawn to Randall's passion for representing black voices. He was quoted as saying his "strongest motivations have been to get good black poets published, to produce beautiful books, help create and define the soul of black folk, and to know the joy of discovering new poets. I guess you could call it production for use instead of for profit" (qtd. in Melhem 191).

Despite her earlier success as a published poet with Harper, finances were always a concern for Brooks. In correspondence with her publisher, she often expressed a desire to earn as much money as possible through the publication of her works, asking her editors to submit her poetry to the publisher's magazine division, *Harper's Bazaar*. In contrast, as a Broadside author, Brooks showed little concern over the financial limitations of publishing under a small literary press. Broadside would be unable to offer her either the advances or royalties she was accustomed to receiving during her time at

Harper, significantly reducing her earnings. What Broadside was able to offer her that Harper was not was complete control over the production of her work. This meant that Brooks would have control over not only the text but also the marketing, advertising, pricing, and design of her work, allowing her to produce poetry collections for a specifically black audience.

In addition to accepting reduced earning for her work, Brooks's showed a deep commitment to the black press by choosing to donate her earned royalties back to Broadside. In doing so, she hoped to be able to provide the financing necessary for the publisher to acquire and publish other young African American poets (Melhem 190). This idea of supporting "one's own" was central to the mission of black presses and linked directly to the Black Nationalist Movement, which believed that blacks must rely on one another for support.

As a black poet, Brooks felt a desire to reach a larger black audience which she contended was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with poetry. She was quoted as saying, "black poets are becoming increasingly aware of themselves and their blackness; they are interested in speaking to black people, and especially want to reach those people who would never go into a bookstore and buy a \$4.95 volume of poetry written by anyone" (qtd. in Gayles 149). Unlike her previous works, *Riot* was specifically produced and marketed for a black audience rather than for the mainstream. In order to reach this particular demographic, Broadside's edition of *Riot* was only thirty-two pages long and it retailed at \$1.00 in paperback and \$3.00 in cloth binding (Young 100).

Despite the low retail price, the quality of the poetry was never compromised in creating a new commercial accessibility. Brooks's use of language was as beautiful and

complex as it had always been, combining both an old and a new style. This is evident in the title poem, "Riot," in which Brooks employs "verse journalism," a genre she claimed to have originated as a means of capturing specific historical moments and events, alongside traditional devices of repetition, metaphor, and biblical imagery.

Literary critics were divided in their responses to *Riot* and much of her post-Harper writing. The mainstream press did not give *Riot* the critical attention her previous books had received, and many white critics expressed frustration over the limited availability of her work. Other established journals such as *School Library Journal* actually attacked Brooks's new style and approach to poetry, accusing *Riot* of "celebrating violence" (qtd. in Poetry Foundation.org).

In contrast, black critics had a positive response to Brooks's work. The author and social activist Toni Cade Bambara praised Brooks's new style in *The New York Times Book Review*, expressing a belief that, at the age of fifty "something happened to Brooks, a something most certainly in evidence in *In the Mecca* and subsequent works—a new movement and energy, intensity, richness, power of statement and a new stripped lean, compressed style. A change of style prompted by a change of mind" (qtd. in Poetry Foundation.org).

Brooks was unmoved by the response of white critics in the mainstream. She was no longer publishing for a white audience. Her ambivalence toward white critics was expressed in a 1971 interview with *Essence Magazine* wherein she stated that "whites are not going to understand what is happening in black literature today. Even those who want to sympathize with it still are not equipped to be proper critics" (*Report from Part One*

176-77). Brooks believed that if black critics like Bambara were able to appreciate and identify a shift in her writing then she had achieved her goal for these later works.

Young in his work on Brooks provides perhaps the most effective way of identifying the different ways Brooks's work was and is marketed, by looking at two of her collections currently available: *Selected Poems*, which was published by Harper in 1963 and most recently reissued by Harper Perennial in 2006; and *Blacks*, published first by Brooks's own press, the David Company, in 1987 and currently printed by Third World Press, 1994. The Harper Perennial paperback edition and the Third World Press paperback edition are suitable for comparison in that both are collections of previously published poetry and, most importantly, both are currently available in print (unlike much of Brooks's later work).

Selected Poems is one hundred and twenty eight pages long and includes pieces from *A Street in Bronzeville*, *Annie Allen*, and *The Bean Eaters*, and a selection of "New Poems." *Blacks* is four times the length of Harper's collection. At five hundred and twelve pages, this is a much more extensive collection covering Brooks's full career, including poems from *Selected Poems*, as well as *Maud Martha*, *In the Mecca*, *Primer for Blacks*, *Beckonings*, *To Disembark*, *Riot*, *Family Pictures*, *To the Diaspora*, and *The Near-Johannesburg Boy*. Harper's *Selected Poems*, with the exception of only a few poems included in the "New Poems," chapter presents a very limited look at Brooks's work, essentially that which was published by Harper.

In contrast, *Blacks* offers a much more comprehensive collection of Brooks's work including not only what was published while at Harper but also her work published by black presses such as Broadside, Third World, and David Company. The discrepancy

between these two collections is so great that, as Young argues, “to read Brooks only through *Selected Poems* or contemporary anthologies is to misread the nature of her career after 1967” (95).

The packaging of the two books is just as significant as the selection of content. While the age-old adage may be “don’t judge a book by its cover,” publishers target specific consumers for a book through the cover design, which is seen as a key marketing tool. While authors may have consultation rights on the jacket, including cover art and copy, they rarely have full approval over the final selection of what appears on the printed books.

Comparing the two collections, we see how each publisher specifically worked to establish a context for their collection. *Selected Poems*, which has undergone multiple reissues by Harper, is today the most accessible collection of Brooks’s work and the way most students come to her work. The current edition was published in 2006 under the Harper Perennial Modern Classics imprint. The front cover design is all black with white artwork running along a side panel. The art is quite nondescript and serves little more than overall aesthetics. Two images in color stand out against the black background. The first is a gold burst that names Brooks as the “Winner of the Pulitzer Prize” and the second is the Harper Perennial olive logo. These two items are the emphasis of the cover, not the author’s name or book title—but rather the prestige of the award and the imprint. The cover also features a quote by Robert F. Kiernan: “Probably the finest black poet of the post-Harlem generation.” Kiernan, a lesser-known biographer, clearly does not reflect the social milieu of Brooks’s literary circle but rather serves to identify Brooks as an African American writer and to position her writing within a historical period, post

Harlem Renaissance. The Harper Perennial imprint name appears branded along the bottom of the cover, and the bottom right corner calls out additional back matter: "P.S. insights, interviews & more."

The back cover features a very brief two-line author biography in which Brooks's date of birth is listed along with a limited list of her books. The selected quotes appearing on the back are all reflective of the publisher's intent to create a design that is both generic and apolitical, perfectly marketed to a universal reading public. Quotes from mainstream media outlets including *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor* are used, along with a very contained quote from Harvey Curtis Webster, a quote which describes Brooks as "a very good poet."

The bibliographical environment of *Blacks* stands in complete contrast to *Selected Poems*. While the choices made in the cover design of *Blacks* also reflect the publisher's marketing plan, the book design represents the work as a product of the Black Arts Movement as well. As James W. Smethurst points out in his article, "Let the World be a Black Poem," "one aspect of the Black Arts Movement is that it was, in general, extraordinarily concerned with investigating the text (and the presentation of the text to an audience) and its relationship to the outside world, especially language and expressive culture beyond the printed page, seeing the relationship as a sort of process rather than a product suitable for framing" (177). Consequently, the simple cover design of *Blacks* takes on new meaning.

The cover of the collection includes a dark blue background against which the title *Blacks* is set in gold. The title is front and center and inescapable, thus calling complete attention to the word "Blacks." With the title *Blacks*, the poetry collection

becomes clearly a racially conscious piece of writing. To individuals familiar with Brooks and the Black Arts Movement, the naming of persons as “blacks” has political implications. Brooks preferred the use of the term “blacks,” insisting that the word was a more inclusive term than “African Americans,” which she argued excluded people of African descent. Anticipating the contemporary word, “diaspora,” Brooks argued that “The capitalized names *Black* and *Blacks* were appointed to comprise an open, wide-stretching, unifying, empowering umbrella . . . I share *Familyhood* with Blacks wherever they may be. I am a *Black*. And I capitalize my name” (qtd. in Gayles 150-51). Unlike the nonspecific title of *Selected Poems*, this title purposely brings with it political and racial implications that allow the poet to engage with her black reader and to create a work that, from the Black Nationalist perspective, is exclusive rather than universal.

It is interesting to note the shift from earlier in her career—when Brooks was urged to adopt a universal approach to her writing in order to avoid alienating white readers—to this point where she intentionally chooses to alienate unsympathetic, disinterested white readers. The title *Blacks*, which Harper would have been unlikely to accept, is also Brooks’s assertion of herself as in control of her own publishing. In a 1990 interview with D. H. Melhem, Brooks, when asked about the satisfactions of publishing her own works, responded, “control over design, print, paper, binding, timing and not least, the capitalization of the word Black. Do Blacks realize that they now have—since they got rid of the term “Negro”—NO capitalizations for their *essence*. Publishers refuse to capitalize Blacks” (qtd. in Gayles 150).

Blacks, in its design, should be seen as a direct reflection of the ideologies of the Black Nationalist Movement. The fact that the publisher, a black literary press, is marked

on the cover only reinforces its place within a black marketplace. The full back cover lists quotes from leading Black Nationalist writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Dudley Randall, and Haki Madhubuti, all testifying to the power of Brooks's "new" style. The quotes reflect the anger and passion of Black people at the time, using powerful words like, "internal bleeding," "the continuing storm," and "bloody beauty" to describe Brooks's writing. The inside front flap lists even more quotes historically aligning Brooks's writing with leading black writers such as Richard Wright and Sonia Sanchez who, like Brooks, was a leading female poet in the Black Arts Movement. The inside back flap provides a more extensive author biography than appeared in any of the Harper editions. Beyond listing the professional accomplishments and honors received by the poet, it identifies Brooks as a daughter, wife, and mother. Young also notes how the biography firmly positions Brooks as a member of the black Chicago community. Harper would have avoided the overt connection between Brooks and Chicago for fear that it would limit her appeal beyond the region.

Third World saw the connection between Brooks and Chicago as a way to further market the poet as part of the Black Arts Movement. During the 1960s, Chicago was one of two major locations for the production of Black Arts literature. The other was the California Bay Area, where the *Journal of Black Poetry* and the *Black Scholar* were being published. Chicago was home to *Negro Digest/Black World*, Third World Press, and Broadside Press. New York, in contrast, only produced two major Black Arts literary publications, both of which were short-lived, the *Black Theatre* magazine and *Black Dialogue*.

It is clear that Gwendolyn Brook's career exists for readers today in two parts: the non-political "safe" image of the pre-1967 universal humanist Harper created, and the politically active Black Nationalist that can be aligned with black presses. As is the case for several Black Arts artists, the problem of out-of-print texts creates a distorted and incomplete view of Brooks's full career. The unavailability of her earlier work has undoubtedly affected her literary legacy for both the current and the future generation. However, one must recognize that the "'shy black young brown woman' reluctant to speak on race relations" was not the same accomplished poet who walked away from her publisher (Melhem 11). In fact, Brooks was extremely aware of the impact of her actions on her career. As Young points out, the "crucial element of Brooks's decision to leave Harper: her willingness to abandon an established New York firm for small black presses in Detroit and Chicago signals her efforts to opt out of the cultural systems of market and canon" (95). At a point in her career where she had achieved international success, Brooks redefined her needs as an artist. The heightened racial consciousness she experienced during the 1960s allowed her to understand that the needs of the black writer were not the same as those of white writers or white publishers and that she was in a position to help not only young black artists but also the presses that helped to publish them. Between her decision to leave Harper and her passing in 2000, Brooks never seems to have regretted her decision.

Crossing Lines—The Black Artist in a White World

"[B]ut you're never out there as somebody from Ohio, or even as a writer. Because all that is clouded by the box you're put in as a Black writer." (Morrison qtd. in Kachka)

During the 1960s and 70s, the large publishing houses began to respond to changes that were taking place in the United States by opening their doors to a select few African American editors. Among these was the novelist Toni Morrison, who would use her position within a mainstream publishing house to help other black women writers get published. Hired in 1964 as an associate editor for a textbook subsidiary of Random House in Syracuse, New York, Morrison was three years later transferred to New York where, for eighteen years, she worked in the trade division of Random House, the largest English language book publisher in the United States. During her time there, she became the first black woman in the company's history to be named a senior editor and was responsible for editing a number of notable books including *The Black Book*, a collection of sketches, notices, and photographs that presents a comprehensive history of African Americans. The project was conceived by Morrison in response to the perception that books directed at African Americans don't sell. Morrison retorts, "And I thought, well maybe we haven't published anything that the larger African American community wanted . . . What about something that's really popular and is about African American life?" (qtd. in "Black Book"). *The Black Book* became a *New York Times* bestseller and confirmed what Morrison knew, namely, that black readers were clamoring for books that told their stories.

While she was employed at Random House, Morrison's role was made clear from the start: she was hired to be the black editor. Rather than reject the position, Morrison

seized her role with a clear agenda. She tells us that in her mind, “there’s all these people out here marching, talking, writing, or being shot, I thought that I was contributing powerfully to the so-called record” (qtd. in Kachka). As a black feminist, Morrison used her position to produce work by talented black women writers including Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gayl Jones. While Bambara and Davis (like Morrison herself) had all felt exploited by the mainstream publishing industry as members of the Black Arts Movement, they recognized in Toni Morrison an editor who would strengthen rather than silence their voices.

Many other black women writing during the 1960s still felt excluded by the New York literary culture. Writers such as Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, and Audre Lorde all looked to the Harlem Writers’ Guild as a means of fostering their work within a community of black artists. The Guild, which was part of the Black Arts Movement, was created with the goal of aiding the publication of work by African diaspora writers by providing funding and support. Angelou joined in the late 1950s and formed relationships with many other writers and artists associated with the group, which eventually lead to the publication of her seminal work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, with Random House in 1969. Marshall was also published by Random House, which produced her novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* in 1959. Yet, the work would receive even greater attention when Feminist Press rediscovered and reprinted it in 1981. Lorde would go on to become a highly respected voice for both black women and lesbians, publishing a number of collections throughout the 1960s and 1970s with primarily black and feminist presses.

Functioning from the unique position of both black female writer and editor, Morrison saw her job with Random House as affording her an insider view that “lessened my awe of the publishing industry” (qtd. in Schappnel 91). Working from the inside gave her insight into how the industry viewed the business of editing, marketing, and selling books to a mainstream audience. She grew to understand the limited space for black women’s writing to achieve commercial success in the marketplace. As an African American editor working in a still predominantly white industry, she came to realize and accept that regardless of the subject matter, writing by an African American would be sold as a text on race:

When I publish Toni Cade Bambara, when I publish Gayl Jones, if they would do what my own books have done [in sales], then I would feel really fantastic about it. But the market can only receive one or two [black women writers]. Dealing with five Toni Morrisons would be problematic I’m not talking about quality of work—who writes better than I do and stuff. I’m just talking about the fact that, in terms of new kinds of writing, the marketplace receives only one or two Blacks in days when it’s not fashionable. That’s true of literature in general, but it’s particularly true for Black writing. (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 133)

As an editor, Morrison developed rules for publishing books by black writers, which included never publishing more than three “black” books in a season, because they would all get reviewed together, no matter how different they were (qtd. in Kachka). In 1987, Morrison left Random House to allow herself more time to write and teach. Despite the limitations which she encountered during her time as an insider, Morrison leveraged her position in order to publish the works of many talented black women writers such as

Jones and Bambara. In doing so, she was able to broaden the market for black female voices by bringing a larger level of mainstream interest to African American women's literature.

One artist who was influenced by the career of Toni Morrison is the poet Rita Dove. A fellow Ohioan, Dove grew up in a middle-class home in Akron. Like Brooks, Dove was encouraged by her parents to write from an early age. She became successful in academia, attending Miami University where she received a Fulbright scholarship which allowed her to travel to Europe in 1973. The experience of living abroad provided Dove with greater insight into her own identity.

Having attended college during the 1970s, Dove was directly exposed to the Black Arts Movement. As a young, black female artist she found others automatically associating her with other members of the Movement. Yet, unlike Gwendolyn Brooks (Dove's senior by thirty-five years), Dove did not see the Movement as offering a free artistic environment for black women writers but rather viewed it as stifling in its extremism. In an interview Dove stated that she "was terrified that [she] would be suffocated before [she] began, that [she] would be pulled into the whole net of whether this was Black enough, or whether [she] was denigrating [her] own people. There is a pressure, not just from the Black Arts Movement, but from one's whole life, to be a credit to the race" (qtd. in Ingersoll 159). This questioning of being "black enough" speaks to her position within an emerging generation which saw the importance of their histories as rooted in blackness but was unwilling to be defined by their race.

Dove clearly separated herself from the Black Arts Movement when, in 1980, she published her first collection of poetry, *The Yellow House on the Corner* containing the

poem "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee in a Dream." In the poem, she expresses hostility toward the Black Arts Movement, in particular toward its leader, Don L. Lee (known today as Haki R. Madhubuti). The language of the poem is severe, as Dove imagines the brutal destruction of Lee, "He starts to cry; his eyeball / Burst into flame. I can see caviar / Imbedded like buckshot between his teeth. / His hair falls out in clumps of burned-out wire" (16). Critics such as Ekaterini Georgoudaki see the poem as a reaction to the Black Nationalist aesthetic and reflective of Dove's desire, as a younger poet, to go "beyond the definition of black literature which reflected the black ideal that prevailed since the late 1960s: 'Black literature BY blacks, ABOUT blacks, directed TO blacks. ESSENTIAL black literature is the distillation of black 'life'" (420).

This poem can also be read as a feminist attack on black male leaders and the entire Black Arts Movement, which has often been criticized for its sexist treatment of black women. The poem's speaker, who we presume represents the female poet, silences the male leader's posturing: "Moments slip by like worms. / 'Seven years ago . . .' he begins; but / I cut him off: 'Those years are gone /What is there now?'" (16). The primary voices of the Black Arts Movement were black males like Don L. Lee, Amiri Baraka, and Etheridge Knight. To a great extent, they dominated the Movement, often overshadowing the women who struggled to be heard. Gwendolyn Brooks can be read as an exception. Her age at the time, older than many others, and her capital as a commercially successful poet—which allowed her to financially support the Movement—may have contributed to her position of influence within.

Many female writers involved with the Black Arts Movement, such as Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, felt suppressed by a male dominated culture that often

dictated what black women should say and how they should think. Both women eventually made the decision to break from the Movement. The scholar Jennifer Walters argues that it was not that Giovanni “completely and suddenly abandoned the racist war being waged against Blacks in America, rather she realized that she must find her own identity and her own poetic voice in order to fight this war successfully” (214). Other female artists who opposed what they saw as sexist beliefs were condemned by the leaders of the Movement. The poet, playwright, and feminist Ntzo Shange had a contentious relationship with male leaders of the Black Arts Movement. Amiri Baraka criticized her work, saying that it represents a “Hollywood” aesthetic, one of “capitulation” and “garbage” (qtd. in Salaam). Baraka condemned Shange’s decision to allow her choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* to be produced on Broadway; he also condemned her very open belief that black women, as a doubly subjugated group, suffer both at the hands of white America and at the hands of black males. These feminist ideas challenged the core of the Black Arts Movement.

Many black female writers who felt excluded by the Black Arts Movement looked to establish a contemporary Black Feminist Movement. The 1979, the Combahee River Collective Statement became the foundation of their work. An offshoot of the second wave of the Feminist Movement, the Collective was founded in 1974 in response to a need for greater attention to the needs of black women as a group oppressed by race, gender, sexuality and class.

Led by Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and Beverly Smith, the Collective’s mission was to bring greater attention to the black women’s battle against racial, sexual,

heterosexual, and class oppressions. They identified the need for a Movement that recognized "Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) [that] has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes" (Combahee River Statement). The Collective disbanded in 1980; however, their work was critical to the recognition of black women's struggles and laid the foundation for the Black Feminist Movement.

Dove, like many of her intellectual and creative contemporaries who were not members of the Collective, was, nonetheless, heavily influenced by its ideas, as well as those of the black female writers who came before her. Black feminist novelists, essayists, and poets like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison endeavored to carve out a path for younger poets like Dove. Dove, who was able to launch her career as a professional writer in the 1970s as a person defined not solely by race or gender but a reflection of both, owed much to her literary foremothers.

In 1987, Dove was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah*, becoming the second African American woman to win the award, the first having been Gwendolyn Brooks. In 1993, Dove was named the Poet Laureate of the United States. These many accolades firmly established her as an accepted member of the literary establishment.

Dove's admission into the literary world may in part be due to her departure from the style of the 1960s and 1970s. Her technique, much like Brooks's early work, is highly technical and reflects a commitment to the traditional form rather than the looseness of structure marking much of the poetry written during the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, Dove's poetry, while certainly speaking to a black experience, breaks from the overtly political. Arnold Rampersand argues that, "In many ways her poems are exactly the

opposite of those that have come to be considered quintessentially Black verse in recent years" (53). He describes her poetry as possessing "eagerness, perhaps even an anxiety, to transcend—if not actually repudiate—black cultural nationalism in the name of a more inclusive sensibility" (53).

The argument that Dove is unwilling to be more political in her poetry clearly positions her as a "safe" figure to represent the black female poet within the establishment. N.S. Boone further argues that Dove has become so comfortable within the establishment that rather than speaking out against the unfairness and mistreatment of female and ethnic writers, she asks them not to write with a "chip" on their shoulders or to write with any rage or bitterness (72). Dove demonstrates her ability to walk the line between writing about blackness and writing about race.

Helen Vendler, a critic known for downplaying race and gender in her criticism, commends Dove as writing "to embody a black identity without being constricted by it to a single manner. More than any other contemporary black poet, Dove has taken on the daunting aesthetic question of how to be faithful to, and yet unconstrained by, the presence—always already given a black American—of blackness" ("Identity Markers" 396-97).

In 2011, Rita Dove was selected by Penguin as the editor of *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Having accepted what she describes in her intro as the "Sisyphean task," Dove spent over four years selecting the one hundred and seventy-five poets who would come to make up the collection. The editing of an anthology is always viewed as a highly controversial act in that every selection is seen as a direct reflection of canon formation. Which works get chosen and how much space a

writer is given are analyzed and criticized by critics over the life of the anthology.

Because every selection is already fraught with political implications, the selection of Dove, a black female, as editor, only enhanced the political significance of every choice.

Dove's awareness of her position and the criticism her choices would inevitably garner become clear as early as her introduction. In her essay, titled "My Twentieth Century of American Poetry," she employs the possessive pronoun "my" as a way in which she can identify the selections as being specific to her choices and, as such, belonging to her alone. By owning the selections that make up the anthology, Dove takes control over what will follow, yet in doing so she also seems to prepare herself to defend her selections. Dove's introduction begins with a response to an email that she had received in which the writer spoke of being glad for "*your* vision of 20th Century American Poetry" (added emphasis mine). The implication is that the writer is pleased to see a black voice in the consideration of the historical value of American poetry. Dove is quick to assert the various constraints placed on the editor, which include the economics of forming anthologies. She alludes to high reprint fees as having kept certain poems and/or poets from being included.

The packaging of the anthology subtly speaks to the politics of Dove's selections. The hardcover is an unjacketed cloth-bound edition with foil stamping on the cover. The book is produced as both a work of literature and a gift edition. In order to eliminate the presence of a price or barcode on the book, it is shrink-wrapped, limiting the buyer's ability to open it and view the contents page. Thus, the back cover becomes important in that it lists nine names (out of 175) of poets in the anthology. The choices include five men, four women, and three poets of color. The front cover is simply designed, limiting

itself to title type treatment and the editor's name listed along the bottom positioned next to the Penguin logo. Such placement associates publisher and editor as one.

Criticism for Dove's anthology came quickly in the form of a review by Helen Vendler entitled, "Are These the Poems to Remember?" Vendler's review appeared in *The New York Review of Books* on November 24, 2011, immediately after the anthology was published. Disapproval of the editor's selections was hardly unexpected, yet what made the review noteworthy (and resulted in what was referred to by the press as a poetry "smack-down") was the way in which Vendler openly criticized Dove for what she viewed as an exaggerated emphasis on poets of color during the second half of the twentieth century. Vendler wrote, "Rita Dove . . . has decided . . . to shift the balance, introducing more black poets and giving them significant amounts of space, in some cases more space than is given to better-known authors. These writers are included in some cases for their representative themes rather than their style. Dove is at pains to include angry outbursts as well as artistically ambitious meditations" (19). Vendler's remarks are reflective of the elitist beliefs that have historically defined American poetry. Such thinking contends that the work of "established" poets (white male poets) is stylistically better than that of poets of color. Vendler's review elicited a response from Dove which was titled, "Defending an Anthology." Her response was published on December 22, 2011, and in it she chastises Vendler for what she sees effectually as a racist belief. Dove goes on to say that:

The amount of vitriol in Helen Vendler's review betrays an agenda beyond aesthetics. As a result, she not only loses her grasp on the facts, but her language, admired in the past for its theoretical elegance, snarls and grouses, sidles and

roars as it lurches from example to counterexample, misreading intent again and again. Whether propelled by academic outrage or the wild sorrow of someone who feels betrayed by the world she thought she knew—how sad to witness a formidable intelligence ravished in such a clumsy performance. (“Defending an Anthology”)

She goes on to attack Vendler for her unwillingness to see past her own aesthetics, which misinform her understanding of twentieth-century American poetry. Many poets joined in the debate, taking both sides and garnering media attention rarely bestowed on the world of poetryⁱⁱ.

Vendler’s critique, with its focus on race, speaks to the vulnerability of the black women in the role of editor. While Vendler’s comments may or may not be justified, it is unlikely that the conversation would have encompassed racial makeup had a white male poet acted as editor of the anthology. The irony that many of Dove’s selections were dictated by the costly fees associated with permissions usage only highlights the troubled position of the minority editor who is always perceived as marking a work with his or her blackness.

Shifting Powers: The Future of Publishing and the Black Woman Writers

There are so many writers of color out there, and often what they get when they bring their books to their editors, they say, ‘We don’t relate to the character.’ Well it’s not for you to relate to! And why can’t you expand yourself so you can relate to the humanity of a character as opposed to the color of what they are?” (Rose qtd. in Beggs)

We can see how, in a period of over a hundred years, a racial divide has impacted the published work of at least three major black women writers. Differences in class, race and gender have created a situation in which white publishers have indelibly left a mark on how these women's writings have been edited, marketed, and consumed. Yet, by reading author/publisher interactions against the backdrop of the cultural movements of the time we are able to witness shifting balances of powers. This is not to say that we have come to a historical moment when the work of a black women writer can be produced in a space that is not marked by her race or gender; however, broader shifts in the culture have begun to change the rigid racial stratifications that surround the work. Contemporary writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Octavia Butler, and Edwidge Danticat have all challenged the preconceived notions of what black women writers can write, while achieving both critical and commercial success with mainstream book publishers.

Despite the fact that the book publishing industry remains a predominantly white institution composed mainly of white editors, agents, booksellers, and book critics, there does seem to be a conversation, particularly in the field of children's literature about the importance of producing books that represent a fast growing multi-cultural American population. Earlier this year, an organization called "We Need Diverse Books" was launched in order to draw more attention to the need for diversity in children's literature. The social media campaign, which is being led by authors, has pointed to the problematic nature of an industry that does not represent its audience. Having already garnered much media attention, the organization has continued to enlist more and more leading authors who support the belief that change needs to happen in the field of book publishing.

Additionally, growth in the e-book industry and the popularity of online retailers like Amazon are creating a larger market for self-publishing. It is unclear how the self-publishing industry will impact large publishing houses in the future, however it is clear already that their power in the marketplace has been lessened. For many writers of color, self-publishing offers the chance to have control over the production of their work.

Additionally, social media have created opportunities through which writers, both those published by mainstream publishers and those self-published, are able to act as their own publicists and booksellers. By becoming the public spokespersons for their own writing, they ensure that books by black women are marketed in the way that they want them to be. While the future of publishing remains unclear, the certainty remains that black women will continue to insist on having their voices heard and wielding control over the publication of their works.

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ⁱ There is much debate over the decision to capitalize the letter "b" in "Blacks" when identifying African Americans as a racial and cultural group. For the purpose of this paper I have decided to lowercase the word in accordance with common grammatical usage. The exception will be when quoting directly from individuals, like Gwendolyn Brooks, who capitalized the letter with intent.

ⁱⁱ Many poets and scholars joined in on this debate taking both sides. Important contributors include Marjorie Perloff and Evie Shockley, each of whom published articles in the *Boston Review* that added to the critical discussion of Dove's selections. Vendler responded with the single line, "I have written the review and I stand by it." (qtd. in Dove "Defending an Anthology").